

Humboldt County Sheriff's Office & CA-DOJ Partner with Othram to Identify 1968 John Doe

After 55 years, the remains of man discovered in Humboldt County, California are identified as **U.S. Marine veteran William Melvin Toller**, born in 1927.

Solved



Summary

In May 1968, the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office (HCSO) received a letter in the mail indicating a human skull had been found near Berry Summit, California. Several detectives followed by Sheriff Gene Cox responded to the scene. It was reported that two teenagers were playing in a pile of rocks when they found a skull on the east side of Berry Summit. The scene was searched and additional remains were located. Detectives learned that the area where the skull was located had been used by Granite Construction in 1965 for storage of debris from a flood that occurred in 1964.

The skeletal remains were sent to the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Washington, DC and examined at the Smithsonian Institute. The remains were later returned to the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office and buried on June 26th, 1968, at

Ocean View Cemetery. Not much was known about the remains other than that they were that of a male individual who was between the ages of 45 and 60 years at the time of his death.

On December 28th, 2010, the unknown individual's remains were exhumed and samples were taken for DNA testing based on a California Department of Justice requirement issued in 2002 necessitating that all unidentified human remains undergo DNA testing. The STR DNA profile was entered into both the California Missing Person DNA Database and National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) DNA Index. Details of the case were entered as NamUs case number UP55806. The DNA profile was routinely searched against profiles from both missing person and other human remains in CODIS, but no match was ever made.

In December 2022, the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office and California Department of Justice once again partnered with Othram to determine if advanced forensic DNA testing could help establish an identity for the unidentified man or a close relative. [HCSO and CA DOJ previously partnered with Othram](#) to identify Denise Gail Cruz, whose remains were discovered in Trinidad, California in 1980. Using funding provided by the Roads to Justice program, the California Department of Justice submitted forensic evidence to Othram in The Woodlands, Texas. Othram scientists used Forensic-Grade Genome Sequencing® to build a comprehensive DNA profile for the man. Once the profile was built, Othram's in-house genealogy team used forensic genetic genealogy to produce new investigative leads.

In August of 2023 the HCSO received the report from Othram indicating the unidentified man may be William Melvin Toller, who was born in 1927. The report included several genetic relatives including a possible child named Anona from Louisiana. HCSO Investigators were able to contact Anona who confirmed she had a father named William Toller, whom the family lost contact with when she was 8 years old. A DNA sample was obtained from Anona and compared to the DNA from the unidentified male. The DNA proved to be a genetic match and confirmed that the John Doe is William Toller.

Anona explained her father had lied on his paperwork about his age and joined the Marine Corps when he was 15 years old. He was later injured during combat in the South Pacific. After completing his enlistment, he attended the University of Idaho and obtained a degree in psychology. Just prior to the Korean War William once again enlisted and was deployed to Korea. This time when he returned home, Anona's mother told her William was a different man. It is probable that William was suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Anona's parents divorced in the 1950s and they lost contact with him.

HCSO thanks the California Department of Justice DNA Lab, Othram, and Roads to Justice for their outstanding work and assistance in solving this case and providing the Toller family with some closure for their missing loved one. The HCSO is continuing its partnership with CA DOJ and Othram, and reviewing several other missing or unidentified remains cases for the use of this latest DNA technology.

Anyone with information regarding Mr. Toller, and his last known activities or whereabouts prior to his death, or information that may assist in the investigation of any open missing persons case is asked to contact HCSO Cold Case Investigator Mike Fridley at [707-441-3024](tel:707-441-3024)